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## DANIEL WEBSTER AS A SYMBOLIC HERO

IRVING H. BARTLETT

IN attempting to explain the "enormous physical magnetism" which Daniel Webster possessed over his fellow citizens, James Parton once wrote:

... Fidgety men were quieted in his presence, women were spell-bound by it, and the busy, anxious public contemplated his majestic calm with a feeling of relief, as well as admiration. Large numbers of people in New England, for many years, reposed on Daniel Webster. He represented to them the majesty and strength of the government of the United States. He gave them a sense of safety. Amid the flighty politics of time and the loud insincerities of Washington, there seemed one solid thing in America, so long as he sat in an arm-chair of the Senate-chamber.<sup>1</sup>

The principle which Parton was struggling to express is now better understood by students of social and political symbolism. They define a "symbolic leader" or hero as one to whom many people respond emotionally, one who moves people, not so much through actual accomplishment as through his image, "the kind of man he seems to be, the style of life or attitude he symbolizes."<sup>2</sup> The symbolic leader may, therefore, be more an actor than a doer, and one of his chief activities is to play a leading role in the "sociodramas" which are essential to sustain the cohesiveness of any society. "The people must have heroes and villains," writes one modern authority, "who struggle to uphold or destroy the principles of social order as depicted in easily understood dramas of community life. This is not because the people cannot reason or are swayed only by passion, but because there is no way to understand what an action means in human relationships unless it is depicted as a dramatic action."<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> James Parton, *Famous Americans of Recent Times* (Boston, 1873), 57.

<sup>2</sup> Orrin E. Klapp, *Symbolic Leaders: Public Dramas and Public Men* (Chicago, 1964), 23.

<sup>3</sup> Hugh Duncan, *Symbols in Society* (New York, 1968), 33.

In his lifetime Daniel Webster was probably worshipped more and hated more fiercely than any other contemporary American leader. Most successful politicians are lavishly praised by their partisans, but the ties which bound Webster to his supporters seemed to transcend political loyalty. His power over the people of Boston and Massachusetts conjured up classical images. He was compared to Pericles, and a writer for the *National Intelligencer* felt that only Shakespeare's lines about Coriolanus could do justice to Webster's reception at home:

I have seen  
The dumb men throng to see him, and the blind  
To hear him speak—the matrons flung their gloves,  
Ladies and maids their scarfs and handkerchiefs,  
Upon him as he passed—the nobles bended,  
As to Jove's statue—and the commons made  
A shower and thunder, with their claps and shouts—  
I never saw the like.<sup>4</sup>

There was nothing ordinary about Webster in the opinion of his admirers. Thomas Starr King likened the natural power of Webster's mind to the groundswell of the ocean and said, "He would have been more fit, by language and manner, than any other man reared on this continent, to represent the American republic in a world's congress of prime ministers and kings."<sup>5</sup> George Hillard, remembering Webster's early career, when he spent much of his time in the country law courts of New England, felt that "the disproportion between the man and his work was so great that it reminded one of the task given Michael Angelo, to make a statue of snow."<sup>6</sup> Longfellow, after reading five cantos in Dante's *Inferno*, wrote in his diary in 1840, "Daniel Webster is the only man of the

<sup>4</sup> *National Intelligencer*, July 17, 1830.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Starr King, *Substance and Show and Other Lectures* (Boston, 1877), 324.

<sup>6</sup> George S. Hillard, "Eulogy pronounced in Faneuil Hall, Boston, November 30, 1852," in S. P. Lyman, *The Public and Private Life of Daniel Webster* (Philadelphia, 1860), II, 202.

living, who I can conceive of as writing such a poem.”<sup>7</sup> And Carlyle, bound by no ties of Boston Whiggery, called Webster a “Parliamentary Hercules” and wrote

. . . one would incline to back him at first glance against all the extant world, the tanned complexion; that amorphous crag-like face; the dull black eyes under their precipice of brows, like dull anthracite furnaces needing only to be *blown*; the mastiff mouth, accurately closed: — I have not traced so much of silent *Berserkir-rage* that I remember of, in any other man.<sup>8</sup>

A measure of the hold which Webster exercised over his contemporaries can be found in the ambivalent remarks of New England reformers. In a letter to an English friend, the antislavery writer Edmund Quincy called Webster, “a sensualist, a libertine and a pauper supported by the contributions of his party,” but only a few lines earlier he had written, “I have no question that he is the ablest man in public life on the stage at this time, and has been since the day of Fox and Pitt.”<sup>9</sup> Theodore Parker, whose funeral sermon on Webster was intended as an antidote to the fulsome eulogies flooding the public presses in 1852, asserted that no living man had done so much “to debauch the conscience of the nation.” But he also confessed that since Charlemagne there had “not been such a grand figure in all Christendom.”<sup>10</sup> Whittier’s indictment of Webster in “Ichabod,” filled with echoes of Webster’s former glory, likens him to a fallen angel. But the most famous and eloquent of all the Webster watchers was Emerson. Upon reading Webster’s reply to Hayne, Emerson wrote, “The beauty and dignity of the spectacle he exhibits should teach men the beauty and dignity of *principles*. This is one that is

<sup>7</sup> Quoted in David Tyack, *George Ticknor and the Boston Brahmins* (Cambridge, 1967), 216.

<sup>8</sup> *The Correspondence of Thomas Carlyle and Ralph Waldo Emerson 1834-1872* (Boston, 1883), I, 247.

<sup>9</sup> Edmund Quincy to Richard Webb, July 14, 1846, Quincy-Webb Correspondence, Boston Public Library.

<sup>10</sup> Theodore Parker, *Additional Speeches, Addresses and Occasional Sermons* (New York, 1864), I, 288, 249.

not blown about by every wind of opinion, but has mind great enough to see the majesty of moral nature and to apply himself in all his length and breadth to it and magnanimously trust thereto."<sup>11</sup> Later Emerson wrote that Webster's speeches represented "the utmost that the unpoetic West has accomplished or can."<sup>12</sup> These remarks were written before Emerson became sympathetic to abolitionism. In 1850, when Webster supported the Fugitive Slave Law, Emerson denounced him with exquisite vehemence. "The word *liberty* in the mouth of Mr. Webster," he wrote in his journal, "sounds like the word *love* in the mouth of a courtesan."<sup>13</sup> What appeared to be a final judgment was summed up with the words, "The fame of Webster ends in this nasty law."<sup>14</sup> Less than two years later, on an October Sunday in 1852, Emerson stood on the beach at Plymouth watching the spray blow off in the direction of Marshfield where Daniel Webster lay still warm in death.

The sea, the rocks, the woods, gave no sign that America and the world had lost the completest man. Nature had not in our days, or not since Napoleon, cut out such a masterpiece. He brought the strength of a savage into the height of culture. He was a man *in equilibrio*; a man within and without, the strong and perfect body of the first ages, with the civility and thought of the last . . . And what he brought, he kept. Cities had not hurt him; he held undiminished the power and terror of his strength, the majesty of his demeanor.<sup>15</sup>

After the Civil War, Webster's reputation, which had suffered during the previous decade because of his role in the Compromise of 1850, emerged again in full glory. Nationalism reigned triumphant and Webster had been the prophet of nationalism, a fact which George Ticknor Curtis, Webster's

<sup>11</sup> Bliss Perry, *The Heart of Emerson's Journals* (Boston, 1926), 45.

<sup>12</sup> Perry, *The Heart of Emerson's Journals*, 85.

<sup>13</sup> Perry, *The Heart of Emerson's Journals*, 252.

<sup>14</sup> *Journals of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Boston, 1912), VIII, 189.

<sup>15</sup> Perry, *The Heart of Emerson's Journals*, 261.

authorized biographer, exploited to full advantage.<sup>16</sup> By the end of the century Webster's memory had taken on a special kind of preeminence. The *New York Times* reported in 1882 that while Clay and Calhoun were regarded with "affectionate human interest" as "well beloved leaders of men," Webster was "almost worshipped as a demi-god,"<sup>17</sup> and in 1898 Bliss Perry gave Webster the Harvard seal of approval by saying that his collected works were "a library of reason and eloquence" comparable in scope and quality to the work of Cicero and Gibbon.<sup>18</sup> In the light of all this it was natural that Webster should have been one of the first three Americans to be elected to the New York University Hall of Fame in 1900.<sup>19</sup>

If a leader is to attract an intense following or opposition it is essential that he remain visible. No American in the first half of the nineteenth century was more visible to the American people than Daniel Webster. For forty years, from 1812 to his death in 1852, he played a dominant national role as lawyer, orator, congressman, senator, secretary of state, and leader of two major parties.

It was Webster's remarkable versatility as well as the length of his political career that helped keep him before the public mind. There were many good lawyers in the Congress but none could claim the double eminence of Webster. "Who anywhere has seen, as he had," asked Rufus Choate, "the double fame, wore the double wreath of Murray and Chatham; or of Dunning and Fox; of Erskine and Pitt; or of William Pinkney and Rufus King, in one transcendent superiority?"<sup>20</sup> We

<sup>16</sup> "It is almost universally admitted that to his teachings and to his influence we owe the prevalence of the constitutional doctrine which made it right for the federal government to vindicate its just authority by resisting an attempt to break up the Union." Curtis made these remarks in a letter to the Webster Centenary in 1882, *The Webster Centennial* (Boston, 1883), 143. The same point is made throughout his *Life of Daniel Webster* (New York, 1870).

<sup>17</sup> *New York Times*, Jan. 18, 1882.

<sup>18</sup> Bliss Perry, *Daniel Webster: Little Masterpieces* (New York, 1898).

<sup>19</sup> Washington received 97 votes and Webster and Lincoln were tied for second place with 96, Richard Current, *Daniel Webster and the Rise of National Conservatism* (Boston, 1955), 188.

<sup>20</sup> Rufus Choate, "Speech Before the Suffolk Bar on Occasion of the Decease of Daniel Webster," in S. P. Lyman, *The Public and Private Life . . .*, II, 180.

should recall in this connection that, although Webster's reputation as a lawyer rests largely on the great cases he argued before the Marshall court, he also carried on an extensive practice outside Washington, and some of his spectacular criminal cases attracted great publicity.<sup>21</sup>

In an age of great orators, few of Webster's contemporaries challenged his preeminence. He was compared to other distinguished orators, like Edward Everett for example, as Michelangelo was to Raphael.<sup>22</sup> Men marked the anniversary date of his speeches with a solemnity usually observed for the birthdays of great men, and later generations of American orators were brought up on Webster's speeches the way writers fed on Shakespeare. In 1900 Henry Cabot Lodge observed that whenever debate in Congress turned to large and weighty issues, Webster would be quoted "twenty times as often as any other public man in our history."<sup>23</sup>

This is not the place for a detailed analysis of Webster's oratorical appeal. Like other men he was capable of ordinary performance. Unlike ordinary men he was frequently called upon to serve a great occasion and he could be counted on to rise to that occasion. Although it would be dangerous to argue that Webster could regularly fascinate an audience more completely than other famous orators like Clay and Wendell Phillips, it is clear that his eloquence had a unique staying power. Thomas Starr King once heard a Yankee farmer compare the oratory of Webster and Clay by saying "I've heerd em both: with Mr. Clay the hearing on't is more than the reading on't, but with Mr. Webster, the reading on't is enough sight more than the hearing on't."<sup>24</sup> The fact is that, given the state of communications in the mid-nineteenth century, most Americans were introduced to Webster through reading his

<sup>21</sup> Webster's speech to the jury in a murder case involving two Salem brothers was widely printed and read. The trial took place shortly after the Webster-Hayne debate. See Claude Fuess, *Daniel Webster* (Boston, 1930), II, 292-298.

<sup>22</sup> Paul Revere Frothingham, *Edward Everett, Orator and Statesman* (Boston, 1925), 393.

<sup>23</sup> Henry Cabot Lodge, *A Fighting Frigate and Other Essays and Addresses* (New York, 1907), 119.

<sup>24</sup> Thomas Starr King, *Substance and Show . . .*, 314.

speeches. Webster's success as an orator depended only in part on his extraordinary presence and a voice which could carry to the far edges of a crowd of tens of thousands; it was dependent to a degree not generally understood on his ability as a writer. He was not one to rush into print with a major effort, and the published speech was usually a much revised edition of the spoken version. The famous Plymouth address was not published until a year after it was given, and the printed speech was longer than the original presentation. The peroration in the Reply to Hayne, which thousands of schoolboys over several generations would commit to memory, was not a verbatim report of what Webster said in the Senate, but a consciously shaped literary effort which Webster revised afterward.<sup>25</sup> The fact that Webster was read so much more widely than any other public man of his time, and that he was looked upon as a literary giant as well as a great lawyer, orator, and statesman contributed heavily to his enormous visibility before the American public.<sup>26</sup>

We know today that the visibility which comes with being a celebrity is not necessarily a natural phenomenon. It can be bought, and in an age in which educated men talk complacently about "the engineering of consent," it frequently is. In Webster's case the danger was not that he would be ignored, but that his image would be identified too closely with the rich industrialists and great cities of the northeastern states. At a time when Americans still clung tenaciously to the agrarian ideal, but poured their fortunes and their energies into building railroads and factories, such an image was a distinct liability for a politician with presidential aspirations. As

<sup>25</sup> The "original" version of Webster's "Reply to Hayne," transcribed from stenographic notes, is in the Boston Public Library and can be compared to the published speech.

<sup>26</sup> A bibliography of Webster's publications listing the many different editions of his most popular speeches can be found in Clifford Clapp, *The Speeches of Daniel Webster, A Bibliographic Review*, Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America, 1919. Vol. 13. Some conception of the wide exposure which Webster has gotten through print can be found in The Catalogue of Printed Cards for the Library of Congress for 1946. There are 148 entries under Webster's name as opposed to 119 for Jefferson, 90 for John Quincy Adams, 73 for Clay, 42 for Calhoun and 20 for Jackson.



a result Webster and his supporters attempted to evoke an image of "the great farmer." He was described in loving detail returning to his ancestral farm in New Hampshire or working in the fields of his estate at Marshfield. He liked to be interviewed while standing in a bed of onions or feeding his prized ram, Goliath. Dixon Wecter has said that Americans distrust presidential candidates who are photographed fishing in their street clothes. Webster was painted in his hunting jacket, and his supporters saw to it that anecdotes about his skill with the rod and gun circulated in the press. However consciously some of his supporters may have strived to shape it, the image of a rustic Webster was not completely false. No one can read Webster's letters without realizing that as hard as he worked in Washington to serve the interests of factory owners, bankers, and merchants, his heart more often than not longed for the peaceful meadows and sweet breezes of Marshfield. The point is that a man so rich in other accomplishments, who could also be seen as a simple lover of the soil, was a man likely to stick in the American mind and imagination.<sup>27</sup>

Webster's remarkable visibility in a variety of roles is at best a half answer to our question. It does not really explain why Emerson thought of him as nature's masterpiece, why Parker likened him to Charlemagne and Longfellow to Dante, why so many of his contemporaries seemed to think of him in superhuman terms. "Mr. Webster had a giant's brain and a giant's heart, and he wanted a giant's work" wrote Hillard.<sup>28</sup> Visibility hardly explains this kind of language, and it certainly does not explain why the expression, "God-like," was regularly applied to Webster both before and after his death, an extravagance of rhetoric equaled only by the religious imagery which attached itself to the assassinated Lincoln.

Obviously Webster, like many symbolic leaders and heroes, was richly endowed with that mysterious gift of presence that

<sup>27</sup> S. P. Lyman wrote a series of newspaper articles exploiting Webster's rural background and devotion to his farms. The articles were published in the Boston press in 1849 and reprinted in *The Public and Private Life of Daniel Webster*, in 1852.

<sup>28</sup> Hillard, in S. P. Lyman, *The Public and Private Life . . .*, II, 217.

we label charisma. It was charisma that Carlyle was responding to in part when he penned his famous description. It was charisma that could make a sophisticated and successful lady of letters like Fanny Fern admit that when Webster kissed the forehead of her grown daughter, she "looked upon it as a sort of baptism."<sup>29</sup> It was charisma that Bostonians responded to when they stopped their horses in the street or stuck their heads out of office windows just to watch Daniel Webster walk by.<sup>30</sup>

Much of Webster's charismatic appeal must have depended on his physical appearance. He was little more than average height, but he gave the impression of a giant. He had been rather fragile as a boy, but in his prime what people noticed most about him was his massive chest (the bellows for the famous Webster voice), leonine head, and the heavily browed black eyes so often compared to furnaces. The size of his head was considered to be highly significant. "His brow," it was said, "was to common brows, what the great dome of St. Peters is to the small cupolas at its side."<sup>31</sup> In an age of phrenology, when mental strength was equated with the size of the brain, the Webster dome was the subject of a good deal of speculation. It was measured at 25 inches around as compared to 23¼ for Clay and 23½ for John Quincy Adams. After he died, Webster's brain was weighed and the phrenologists were delighted to discover that against an average weight of 50 ounces, the Webster brain weighed 63¾, close to the largest brain on record (Turgenev's at 65 ounces).<sup>32</sup> Even today one can find in the Dartmouth Archives a picture of one of Webster's straw hats with a careful notation of its inside measurements.

It has been argued that much of the force of charisma in his-

<sup>29</sup> This anecdote is reported in an undated and unidentified newspaper clipping among the Webster papers in the Princeton library.

<sup>30</sup> T. W. Higginson observed just such a phenomenon when, as a young Harvard student, he had occasion to visit Boston on business. T. W. Higginson, *American Orators and Oratory* (Cleveland, 1901), 54.

<sup>31</sup> Hillard, in S. P. Lyman, *The Public and Private Life . . .*, 223.

<sup>32</sup> Nelson Singer and H. S. Drayton, *Heads and Faces and How to Study Them* (New York, 1892), 47, 52.

tory is really "the force of drama," which is another way of saying that the talents of the charismatic leader are really dramatic talents.<sup>33</sup> This observation is particularly relevant to our understanding of Webster because almost everyone who knew him remarked on his dramatic talent. Jeremiah Mason, probably his closest friend for many years, said that Webster was a born actor, and that touring the courts with him in New Hampshire was like being on a caravan.<sup>34</sup> Oliver Dyer reported that everything Webster did in the Congress was dramatic. His customary dress, the black long tailed coat with gold buttons, buff-colored vest and blue pantaloons, was a dramatic reminder of the revolution. He was a master of late entrances, and the mere sight of him approaching his seat in the Senate would command attention. When he got up to speak it was "not a mere act; it was a process," like an elephant's rising with an intellectual dimension to it.<sup>35</sup> And one cannot escape the feeling that the frequent references to Webster's self-absorption, the likening of him to a slumbering giant or lion, unwilling to vent his fantastic power on trifling matters, was in part, at least, a studied effort.

If a politician is to become a symbolic leader he needs in addition to dramatic talent, a clearly defined role to play. Some find their role as crusaders, some as martyrs, some as spiritual leaders. The role which Webster played so well is that of the "guardian" or "defender."

The guardians express the ideals of the community. In art drama, celestial choric groups of angels, spirits or gods are solemn, majestic and sublime. In community celebrations the guardians embody the dignity and honor of community ideals . . . When community guardians address individuals struggling to make sense out of conflicting loyalties, they speak with deep conviction and power, because they speak as the conscience of the community.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>33</sup> Orrin Klapp, *Symbolic Leaders*, 254.

<sup>34</sup> A good description of Webster's dramatic style in the New Hampshire courts can be found in Peter Harvey, *Reminiscences of Daniel Webster* (Boston, 1877), 48-50.

<sup>35</sup> Oliver Dyer, *Great Senators Forty Years Ago* (New York, 1889), 289.

<sup>36</sup> Hugh Duncan, *Symbols in Society*, 96.

The need for "guardians" and "defenders" in antebellum America is suggested by a number of recent monographs which show how deeply ambivalent Americans were during the first half of the nineteenth century about the velocity of change in their society.<sup>37</sup> On the one hand, they felt that their spectacular social and economic growth might be a sign that they were the chosen people. On the other, they feared they might be captured by materialism and cut off from the more heroic virtues of their past.<sup>38</sup> The age of the "great triumvirate" of Webster, Calhoun, and Clay, was, in other words, an age of anxiety, and in no part of the nation was the level of anxiety higher than in New England.

One of the most complete statements of this anxiety can be found in an essay which one of Webster's admirers, James Hillhouse, published in Boston in 1839. His theme was the duty of the literary man in a democracy, and he began with the assumption that democratic society tends to destroy its own past.

Our history *begins* with the abandonment of time-honoured things, and the description of old attachments. We have no antiquity, no ancestral prejudices, to honor. We have, as it were, built an empire in a day, and *one* of our dangers is indicated by symptoms of too slightly reverencing the work of our own hands.

Look around and look back: compare the public men of our later, with those of our earlier day, and be yourselves the judges. Number the illustrious hands whom you would now bow down to with inevitable respect. Where are they?—Whom do we trust or reverence?—Where is our cohort of civic wisdom? Where is the solitary example of unslandered patriotism?

The duty of the intellectual in a democracy, wrote Hillhouse, was to build "towers of light to preserve rational liberty" to

<sup>37</sup> See for example Marvin Meyers, *The Jacksonian Persuasion* (New York, 1960); John W. Ward, *Andrew Jackson, Symbol for an Age* (New York, 1962), and William Taylor, *Cavalier and Yankee* (New York, 1957).

<sup>38</sup> This point is made with great clarity in a suggestive monograph by Fred Somkin, *Memory and Desire in the Idea of American Freedom, 1815-1860* (Ithaca, 1967).

prove that justice, tranquility, safety, religion, and equality can coexist without coercion. "To satisfy the world on these and such-like points," he concluded, "by our happy example and philosophical arguments is a god-like trust."<sup>39</sup>

Hillhouse was a member of the "displaced Federalist elite" that David Tyack describes in his biography of George Ticknor, and it is no accident that this group brought Webster from Portsmouth to Boston and provided the hard core of his support throughout his career.<sup>40</sup> As we will see, Daniel Webster made it possible for these men to continue to believe in America. They saw in him a natural American aristocrat, a natural link to the virtue of the past. Reared in poverty on the frontier, shaped by American institutions, Webster was a leader among that group of men whom Justice Story said "may safely be entrusted with public affairs because they have high talents and solid acquirements . . . a lofty ambition as well as an honest purpose, to serve their country, and to give permanence to its institutions and interests."<sup>41</sup>

Webster came to Boston in 1816 and his public reputation which probably reached its highest point in 1830 was based substantially on the great patriotic orations of the 1820's (Plymouth 1820, Bunker Hill 1825, Adams and Jefferson 1829) and the famous debate with Hayne in 1829. During this period he more than satisfied the expectations that men like Hillhouse, Ticknor, and Story held for the American statesman, and attracted widespread enthusiasm outside New England. It is my contention that Webster's "greatness" emerged during these years as he began to take on more and more of the overtones of the symbolic hero.

Daniel Webster's first published oration was delivered in

<sup>39</sup> James A. Hillhouse, *Dramas, Discourses and Other Pieces* (Boston, 1839), II, 98-131.

<sup>40</sup> Tyack, *George Ticknor*. . . . This book is full of suggestive insights regarding the ideological and emotional ties which bound Boston Federalists to Webster. It is probable that some of them actually subsidized Webster in order to get him to Boston.

<sup>41</sup> Joseph Story, "Statesmen—Their Rareness and Importance," *The New England Magazine* (August, 1834), 90.

Hanover, New Hampshire in 1800 when he was eighteen years old. Although a conventional Fourth of July address, it still gives us a glimpse of the young Webster cast as guardian. He called up the memory of Washington, "the man who never felt a wound, but when it pierced his country, who never groaned, but when fair freedom bled," and the revolutionary fathers, "For us they fought! for us they bled! for us they conquered," and challenged his audience never to "pusillanimously disclaim the legacy bequeathed us."<sup>42</sup> We can trace the same theme through all of his early published speeches, including those given during his first years in Congress when he led a partisan Federalist onslaught on "Mr. Madison's War."

Once he was established in Boston, Webster's guardian role in a series of social dramas, appealing first to local and then to national audiences, became more fully defined. His participation in the Massachusetts Constitutional Convention may be taken as a starting point. Here he quickly took his place with the "small minority of highly cultivated and experienced men" (that is, men of the Hillhouse, Ticknor, and Story stripe) who "commonly governed the decisions of the body." At the convention Webster was instrumental in getting his fellow delegates to keep the provisions of the Constitution of 1780 which apportioned Senators according to the amount of taxable property in the various districts. The trend elsewhere was toward more democracy, toward a greater reliance on popular suffrage and away from property restrictions, but in Massachusetts Webster successfully guarded the old way. "It was a glorious field for him," Story reported, "and he has had an ample harvest. The whole force of his great mind was brought out . . . On the whole I never was more proud of any display than his in my life."<sup>43</sup>

To a man with Webster's strong ancestral sense, it must have come as a special honor to be invited to give the oration

<sup>42</sup> Webster, *Writings and Speeches* (Boston, 1903), xv, 475-485.

<sup>43</sup> George Ticknor Curtis, *Life of Daniel Webster* (New York, 1870), I, 181.

at the bicentennial celebration of the landing of the Pilgrims at Plymouth on December 22, 1820. The ceremony was held at the First Church, and Plymouth was overflowing with visitors. The Plymouth oration was by far Webster's most impressive intellectual effort to date, and one of the most pervasive themes in it concerned the necessity and duty of Americans to reunite themselves to a living past.

We have come to this Rock, to record here our homage for our Pilgrim Fathers; our sympathy in their sufferings; our gratitude for their labors; our admiration of their virtues; our veneration for their piety; and our attachment to those principles of civil and religious liberty, with which they encountered the dangers of the ocean, the storms of heaven, the violence of savages, disease, exile, and famine, to enjoy and to establish.

Later Webster said, "There is a local feeling connected with this occasion, too strong to be resisted; a sort of *genius of the place*, which inspires and awes us."<sup>44</sup> So successfully did he evoke the sacredness of place, that some of his listeners were almost overcome with the genius of the orator. George Ticknor, a scholarly and sophisticated young man, and one who had viewed the greatest and most majestic figures in Europe with cool detachment, recorded his response to the oration in a letter written that same day.

I was never so excited by public speaking before in my life. Three or four times I thought my temples would burst with the gush of blood; for, after all, you must know that I am aware that it is no connected and compacted whole, but a collection of wonderful fragments of burning eloquence, to which his whole manner gave tenfold force. When I came out, I was almost afraid to come near him. It seemed to me as if he was like the mount that might not be touched and that burned with fire. I was beside myself, and am so still.<sup>45</sup>

In a particularly happy phrase, Fred Somkin has called

<sup>44</sup> *Writings and Speeches*, 1, 183.

<sup>45</sup> Claude Fuess, *Daniel Webster*, 1, 287.

Lafayette's visit to the United States in 1825 "the second coming of Washington," and has shown how Americans who celebrated his return at a time of general anxiety about national virtue participated in a "ritual substitute for a desired republican grace."<sup>46</sup> It was appropriate that Daniel Webster should have been chosen to play the role of high priest before Lafayette and a huge audience at the laying of the Bunker Hill monument in 1825. Demosthenes had prepared for his great triumph by learning to speak with pebbles in his mouth. Webster rehearsed for Bunker Hill while standing in a Cape Cod trout stream, one hand grasped firmly to a fish pole while the other was extended in salutation to the imaginary throng. The real audience on June 17 numbered in the tens of thousands, and the parade preceding the speech was so long that the first marchers had already reached Charlestown bridge before the rear had left Boston Common. Webster was to speak from a platform erected at the foot of Bunker Hill. Seating had been constructed in a semicircle extending part way up the hill for about a thousand ladies plus the Bunker Hill veterans and those who had marched in the procession. There were other thousands of spectators jammed together near the top of the hill beyond the seats. After Lafayette had taken his place with the Bunker Hill veterans and the Reverend Joseph Thaxter, who had served as chaplain at this very spot fifty years before, had raised his ancient voice in prayer, Daniel Webster strode forward and began to speak. At this moment the crowd in the distance began to push closer in an attempt to get more clearly within hearing distance. Under this pressure some of the improvised seating began to collapse and the great ceremony seemed on the verge of degenerating into hysteria and confusion as constables and guards struggled to keep order. Then came one of those legendary moments in Webster's long career. When a member of the committee said it would be impossible to restore order, Webster retorted thunderously, "Nothing is impossible sir! Let it be done."

<sup>46</sup> Somkin, *Memory and Desire* . . . , 151, 161.



Advancing to the front of the platform with a voice that seemed to come from Jehovah, he directed the marshals: "Be silent yourself and the people will obey!" Instantly the tumult subsided and the orator continued with his speech.<sup>47</sup>

The Plymouth Oration had been an attempt to evoke the spirit of peace consecrated by the Pilgrims and to reavow the high moral principles for which they sacrificed themselves. At Bunker Hill, Webster undertook to do much the same thing—to make his audience feel the sacredness of place and to call them back in time, before the living relics of a more glorious day, to the great principles of the Revolution. Reminding his auditors that the number of states had doubled since 1775, that the American population had increased many times, that American prosperity was the envy of the world, Webster spoke for the need of a great symbol to remind Americans, through all progress and disaster yet to come, of their indebtedness to a virtuous past.

... our object is, by this edifice, to show our own deep sense of the value and importance of the achievements of our ancestors; and by presenting this work of gratitude to the eye, to keep alive similar sentiments, and to foster a constant regard for the principles of the revolution.<sup>48</sup>

Webster's First Bunker Hill Address is considered one of his finest. It was printed and reprinted many times, and entire generations of American schoolboys were soon reciting it in classrooms across the country. As we return to it today, it is almost impossible to recapture the impact it had on the original audience unless we remember how charged the occasion was with pride and sentiment. The orator and his audience stood on hallowed ground. The survivors of those who had fought and bled to hold that ground a half century earlier and who listened with tear-drenched faces as Webster re-created the battle before them, along with Washington's great Lieutenant Lafayette, provided a resonance for Webster's rhetoric that

<sup>47</sup> Fuess, *Daniel Webster*, 295-299.

<sup>48</sup> *Writings and Speeches*, I, 237.

few orators in our history have ever been able to command. A reporter to the *National Intelligencer*, looking back from the perspective of five years, described the drama of the occasion.

The oration at Bunker Hill was literally delivered to the world. In the open air, exposed to sun and winds, stood an orator ripe with the thoughts of manhood, before all the impressions and glow of early days had gone; myriads of listeners were around him, among them the representatives of other hemispheres: holy men who were just entering eternity . . . the bones of friends & enemies were shaking in their graves beneath the feet of new & old generations, and passing time was announcing that half a century had elapsed since the roar of battle had broke over the sacred ground; the corner stone of a time-defying monument was then resting at his feet, and a hundred thousand bosoms in his sight were swelling and heaving with patriotism and republican pride; how sublime the scene! what a moment for "thoughts that breathe, and words that burn"; and is it not enough to say that all were satisfied.<sup>49</sup>

Little more than a year after the Bunker Hill celebration, John Adams and Thomas Jefferson died on the same day, July 4, 1826. On August 2, upon the request of the municipal authorities in Boston, Daniel Webster delivered a memorial address on Adams and Jefferson in Faneuil Hall. Once again the occasion was freighted with drama and symbolism. Once again Webster played the guardian's role, reconstructing this time not the Puritan past nor the revolution, but that climactic moment in the American experience when the Declaration of Independence was signed. Webster spoke for two and one-half hours to what John Quincy Adams said was the largest crowd he ever saw in Boston, and "held the whole assembly mute."<sup>50</sup> So successful was Webster in re-creating the debates over the Declaration that the speech which he imagined Adams as giving, beginning with the much quoted lines "Sink or swim, live or die, survive or perish, I give my hand and my

<sup>49</sup> *National Intelligencer*, July 17, 1830.

<sup>50</sup> John Quincy Adams, *Diary*, Allan Nevins, editor (New York, 1951), 363.

heart to this vote. It is true indeed that in the beginning we aimed not at independence. But there's a divinity which shapes our ends," was taken as Adams' actual words and not as Webster's dramatic reconstruction of the event.<sup>51</sup>

Webster's role at the Massachusetts Constitutional Convention and the three great patriotic orations which he gave between 1820 and 1826 did much to enhance his reputation in New England and throughout the nation. The debate with Robert Hayne of South Carolina in the United States Senate in January 1830 put the final jewel in his crown.

The details of the Webster-Hayne debate are well understood and do not need to be recounted here. It began when Webster walked into the Senate to hear Hayne in the midst of an attack on the alleged antiwestern land policies of the north-eastern states. Hayne's strategy was to forge a political alliance between western and southern states to further Calhoun's presidential aspirations. His particular charge was that the northeast wanted the government to charge high prices for public lands in order to keep a depressed laboring population in eastern cities, and to provide revenues which would allow for the "consolidation" of the federal government. Webster replied with a short extemporaneous speech which argued among other things that the clearest evidence of prowestern sentiment by New Englanders had been their support of the Ordinance of 1787 which kept slavery out of the northwest territory. Hayne, a florid, intense and proud man, answered with a two-day speech which included a sarcastic, detailed examination of Webster's Federalist record in Congress, made a passionate defense of slavery, and with the help of encouraging notes passed down from the desk of the presiding Calhoun, finished with a ringing reaffirmation of the South Carolina theory of nullification.

By the time Webster, who sat through the entire punishing performance taking notes, was prepared to answer Hayne again, it had become clear that this was no ordinary political

<sup>51</sup> *Writings and Speeches*, I, 309, 325.

debate. "Everyone is thronging to the capitol to hear Mr. Webster's reply," wrote Mrs. Harrison Smith. "A debate on political principle would have no such attraction. But personalities are irresistible. It is a kind of moral gladiatorship . . . the Senate Chamber is the present arena and never were the amphitheatres of Rome more crowded by the highest ranks of both sexes . . . Every seat, every inch of ground, even the steps, were *compactly* filled . . . the Senators were obliged to relinquish their chairs of State to the fair auditors who literally sat in the Senate."<sup>52</sup>

Webster's *Second Reply to Hayne* was given from twelve pages of notes. It took several hours, spread over two days to deliver, and after extensive revision was printed in a form that takes up seventy-five pages in the national edition of Webster's *Works*. Among other things the speech was a defense of the American system, and Webster's and New England's record during the bitterly partisan years of the embargo and War of 1812. Webster was most effective and most remembered, however, for his defense of federal constitutional power and his appeal to national pride and sentiment.

He began his refutation of Hayne's constitutional position by distinguishing it from the right of revolution, which he said, every American would admit. "I understand the gentleman to maintain, that, without revolution, without civil commotion, without rebellion, a remedy for supposed abuse and transgression of the powers of the general government lies in a direct appeal to the interference of the state governments." After Hayne had interrupted to give his consent to this interpretation, Webster went on to show how it was wrong in principle and bound to be disastrous in practice. Webster argued that the federal government was not the limited creation of sovereign states but a popular government with powers derived directly from the people and spelled out by the constitution.

<sup>52</sup> Mrs. Samuel Harrison Smith, *The First Forty Years of Washington Society* (New York, 1906), 309.

I hold it to be a popular government, erected by the people; those who administer it, responsible to the people; and itself capable of being amended and modified, just as the people may choose it should be. It is as popular, just as truly emanating from the people, as the State governments. It is created for one purpose; the State governments for another. It has its own powers, they have theirs. There is no more authority with them to avert the operation of a law of Congress, than with Congress to arrest the operation of their laws. We are here to administer a Constitution emanating immediately from the people, and trusted by them to our administration.<sup>53</sup>

Who was to decide the constitutionality of state or federal law? The answer, Webster said, was clearly given in the Constitution itself in the two clauses which made the Constitution "the supreme law of the land" and extended the judicial power "to all cases arising under the Constitution and laws of the United States."

These two provisions cover the whole ground. They are, in truth, the keystone of the arch! With these it is a government; without them it is a confederation. In pursuance of these clear and express provisions, Congress established, at its very first session, in the judicial act, a mode for carrying them into full effect, and for bringing all questions of constitutional power to the final decision of the Supreme Court. It then, Sir, became a government. It then had the means of self-protection; and but for this, it would, in all probability, have been now among things which are past.<sup>54</sup>

To proceed on the opposite assumption—that the states were sovereign and could decide to obey or disobey federal laws at their pleasure was to take a giant step toward civil war. Webster contrasted this bloody prospect with the harmony of the early republic when Massachusetts and South Carolina had united to throw off British tyranny. "Would to God that harmony might again return! Shoulder to shoulder they went through the Revolution, hand in hand they stood round the

<sup>53</sup> *Writings and Speeches*, vi, 66.

<sup>54</sup> *Writings and Speeches*, vi, 68.

administration of Washington, and felt his own great arm lean on them for support."<sup>55</sup> And finally the great peroration:

... When my eyes shall be turned to behold for the last time the sun in heaven, may I not see him shining on the broken and dishonored fragments of a once glorious Union; on States dissevered, discordant, belligerent; on a land rent with civil feuds, or drenched, it may be, in fraternal blood! Let their last feeble and lingering glance rather behold the gorgeous ensign of the republic, now known and honored throughout the earth, still full high advanced, its arms and trophies streaming in their original lustre, not a stripe erased or polluted, nor a single star obscured, bearing for its motto, no such miserable interrogatory as "What is all this worth?" nor those other words of delusion and folly, "Liberty first and Union afterwards"; but everywhere, spread all over in characters of living light, blazing on all its ample folds, as they float over the sea and over the land, and in every wind under the whole heavens, that other sentiment, dear to every true American heart, —Liberty *and* Union, now and for ever, one and inseparable!<sup>56</sup>

We know now that this passage which went closer to the American heart than anything Webster ever wrote—the passage that appeared in the printed version of the speech—was not a verbatim report of his actual words. We know also from the reports of the Senators themselves that Webster's dramatic effect at the end was overpowering on his audience. And we know from the stenographic notes taken by Joseph Gales whom Webster had asked to record his speech, that Webster's last spoken words were "Union *and* Liberty, now and forever, one and inseparable."<sup>57</sup>

Webster's *Reply to Hayne* did not reach the American public in written form until February 23, 25, and 27 when it appeared in three installments in the *National Intelligencer*. Soon it was being sold everywhere and in greater demand than any Congressional speech in American history. A correspon-

<sup>55</sup> *Writings and Speeches*, vi, 49.

<sup>56</sup> *Writings and Speeches*, vi, 75.

<sup>57</sup> A manuscript copy of the speech transcribed from stenographic notes is in the Rare Books Room of the Boston Public Library.

dent from Jackson's home state wrote that Webster was known "in every log house" in western Tennessee as "the champion of the Union."<sup>58</sup>

The Hayne debate not only nationalized Webster's reputation; it gave him a base of popular support from which he might reasonably seek the presidency, and also forged the final link in the magnetic chain which bound him to his worshipping followers in New England. The speech which was powerful enough to draw plaudits from an old adversary like Madison and from competitors like Clay, inspired reverence and awe among more intimate friends.<sup>59</sup> Amos Lawrence wrote, "I thank you as a citizen of Massachusetts, of New England, of the United States, not only for myself but for my children."<sup>60</sup> George Ticknor, who reviewed the first volume of Webster's speeches a year later, felt he could now explain Webster's power.

We feel as if the sources of his strength, and the mystery by which it controls us, were, in a considerable degree, interpreted. We feel that like the fabulous giant of antiquity, he gathers it from the very earth that produced him, and our sympathy and interest, therefore, are excited not less by the principle on which his power so much depends, than by the subjects and occasions on which it is so strikingly put forth. We understand better than we did before not only why we have been drawn to him, but why the attraction that carried us along, was at once so cogent and so natural.<sup>61</sup>

What Ticknor seems to have responded to was the fact that

<sup>58</sup> A. M. Hughes to Webster, April 28, 1830, Webster Papers, New Hampshire Historical Society.

<sup>59</sup> Webster sent a copy of the speech to Madison and the ex-President replied on March 15, 1830, "I return my thanks for the copy of your late very powerful speech in the Senate of the United States. It crushes 'nullification' and must hasten an abandonment of secession," *The Private Correspondence of Daniel Webster*, Boston, 1875, I, 496. A few weeks later Clay referred in a letter to the "Triumphant vindication of New England which the debate in the Senate has produced. Webster's speech is above all praise," Clay to Edward Everett, April 10, 1830, Massachusetts Historical Society.

<sup>60</sup> *The Private Correspondence of Daniel Webster*, I, 489.

<sup>61</sup> George Ticknor, "Webster's Speeches," *American Quarterly Review* (June, 1831).

Webster had made possible a new perception of America, rooted in constitutional order and liberty, the present and future continuous with the wisdom and virtue of the past. Webster's friend, William Sullivan, wrote from Boston that the most valuable thing about Webster's replies to Hayne was "that they teach the citizens in general what their relation to the Federal government is," and Webster's oldest son, Fletcher, wrote to his father, "I never knew what the constitution really was, till your last short speech. I thought it was a compact between the states."<sup>62</sup>

The image of Daniel Webster which had been an emerging phenomenon in the 1820's became fixed in the minds of many Americans after 1830. Webster's name became symbolically attached to the concepts of Constitution, Union, and the stability and patriotic virtue of the age of Washington. In 1860 it was essentially Webster's vision of the Union which Lincoln articulated and the North responded to with massive enthusiasm. And after the war, when the principle of Union had been vindicated at terrible cost, the great speeches of Daniel Webster seemed even more prophetic than before, and the lesser New Englanders who played such an important role in writing the textbooks for American schools in the last half of the nineteenth century, made sure that his memory would stay green.<sup>63</sup> No matter how controversial Webster's political career had been, no matter how many frailties could be found in his private and public life—on the great subjects, Constitution, Union, the American Past—Daniel Webster's guardianship, like a great natural law, never wavered. "He was independent, self-poised, steadfast, immovable," wrote one eulogist, "*you could calculate him like a planet.*"<sup>64</sup>

W. Lloyd Warner has said that symbolic heroes "release and

<sup>62</sup> *The Private Correspondence of Daniel Webster*, I, 497, Fletcher Webster to Daniel Webster, March 23, 1830, Webster Papers, New Hampshire Historical Society.

<sup>63</sup> Ruth M. Elson, *Guardians of Tradition: American Schoolbooks of the Nineteenth Century* (Lincoln, 1964).

<sup>64</sup> *The Life, Eulogy and Great Orations of Daniel Webster* (Rochester, 1854), 6.



free us, yet bind and control us, for they take us out of ourselves and permit us to identify with the ideals of our culture. The sacred ideals of godhead are never more than one step beyond; sometimes they are immediate and present, for in human history heroes often become gods."<sup>65</sup>

It was Daniel Webster's destiny to become "godlike" while he lived, but in the end this was probably a dubious blessing, for as Warner has also said, "a champion in America . . . must be forever on his guard to be more the common man than champion, lest his followers look for new Davids to slay him."<sup>66</sup>

<sup>65</sup> W. Lloyd Warner, *The Living and the Dead: A Study of the Symbolic Life of Americans* (New Haven, 1959), 97.

<sup>66</sup> Warner, *The Living and the Dead* . . . , 90.